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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000874

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DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
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P FOR DRUSSELL, RRANGASWAMY
DRL/NESA FOR WHITMAN, BARGHOUT
PARIS FOR JMILLER
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OVP FOR HMUSTAFA

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PINR PTER MARR MOPS LE SY

SUBJECT: LEBANON: MARCH 14 LEADERS AGREE TO GIVE JUMBLATT
SPACE

REF: A. REF A) BEIRUT 866
 B. REF B) BEIRUT 873

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) March 14 coalition leaders in separate meetings revealed most were unsurprised by Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) leader and MP Walid Jumblatt's reassessment of his alliance with the majority bloc, and all stressed their decision to leave space to allow Jumblatt to rejoin the coalition should he choose to. Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri was reportedly furious with Jumblatt, and PSP MP Marwan Hamadeh confirmed he had been running interference between the two. Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea believed Jumblatt's weekend statements were part of the groundwork he was laying to broker a rapprochement with Syria. End Summary.

HARIRI "FURIOUS"
WITH JUMBLATT

¶2. (C) In remarks at this weekend's Progressive Socialist Party convention, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt declared it was time to sever ties with the March 14 coalition. Describing the alliance as driven by "necessity" Jumblatt asserted the his ties to the group must not continue in the same form. His remarks were enthusiastically greeted by Syrian-aligned Lebanese political figures such as his Druze rival and Lebanese Democratic Party head Talal Arslan and Lebanese Unification Movement leader Wiam Wahab. Saad Hariri's Future Movement issued a statement strongly criticizing Jumblatt, and March 14 Secretariat Secretary General Fares Souaid told us today that last night Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri declared to him he would no longer form a cabinet. Souaid, who recently predicted the weakening of the March 14 Coalition (ref A), believed that Hariri's threats were "empty" and made in frustration; Saad hoped to pressure Jumblatt and influence public opinion in favor of March 14. Souaid said he spoke with Jumblatt ally Minister of State Wael Abou Faour and stressed to him that Jumblatt would continue to have a place within March 14 and could return whenever he

wished.

13. (C) Hariri's chief of staff Nader Hariri told the Ambassador today that the Future Movement had released its statement in response to Jumblatt's comments and was standing by it. According to Nader, it was "early" to assess the impact of Jumblatt's remarks, although he termed it "a significant event." However, PSP MP and Jumblatt adviser Marwan Hamadeh told Ambassador that Hariri was furious over Jumblatt's actions. Hamadeh claimed that Hariri "doesn't want to see anyone or talk to anyone and wants to take a plane and go to Monaco." In a meeting last Friday with the Ambassador and PolOffs (ref B), Hariri had insisted his March 14 allies would not be a barrier to government formation negotiations because "they have nowhere to go." He cited Jumblatt -- as well as Geagea and Gemayel -- by name, emphasizing there had been no withdrawal from March 14 principles.

HAMADEH STUCK
IN THE MIDDLE

14. (C) Hamadeh told us that he was running interference between Hariri and Jumblatt and confirmed he had met with the latter earlier in the day. According to Hamadeh, Jumblatt insisted that he was ready to relinquish any MP in his block to ensure that March 14 could retain its majority. Hamadeh said he planned to meet with Christian Democratic Gathering Bloc MPs Fouad Saad and Henri Helou as well as with National Liberal Party head Dory Chamoun later in the day to assess the situation and decide on the best approach for dealing

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with Jumblatt. Jumblatt's 12-member Democratic Gathering Bloc includes six Maronite, Sunni, Greek Orthodox, and Greek Catholic MPs, he noted. "Jumblatt's parliamentary group was elected on the backs of Christians and Sunnis," he declared.

15. (C) Hamadeh also expressed his own frustration with Jumblatt. "I told him if you want to go to Damascus, you don't have to go over all of our bodies." According to Hamadeh, Jumblatt is afraid of a future conflict between Lebanon's Shia and Druze communities as well as the potential fall-out from a ruling by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. Hamadeh was convinced all would turn out well if March 14 leaders remained calm, and he asked the Ambassador to urge Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea and Kataeb leader Amine Gemayel to refrain from public comment on the matter.

16. (C) Caretaker Minister of State and Jumblatt confidant Wael Abou Faour, for his part, asserted that Jumblatt has not made a decision to leave the March 14 Coalition and that he has no plans to make additional statements beyond his weekend remarks. According to Abou Faour, Jumblatt's comments were a recognition of the March 14 Coalition's "demise" and not a change of principles.

GEAGEA INSISTS JUMBLATT-SYRIA
RAPPROCLEMENT IN THE OFFING

17. (C) In an August 3 meeting with the Ambassador, Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea believed Jumblatt's weekend statements were part of the groundwork Jumblatt was laying to broker a rapprochement with Syria. "A Waliid Jumblatt visit to Syria is not just a visit but much more; it is a renewal of a strategic alliance." Geagea trusts that he and Hariri can use Hamadeh as a rallying point for the Druze and can also convince MP Nehme Tohmeh and others to split from Jumblatt's bloc. Geagea was convinced the Druze community would not follow Jumblatt blindly. "The Druze are at the heart of March 14," he said. Geagea suggested that Hariri should begin to prepare Hamadeh for a more central role. He assessed the only way to minimize the impact of Jumblatt's shift would be to peel away Hamadeh and other MPs from his bloc to impede him.

COMMENT

¶8. (C) Jumblatt's first and foremost concern has always been the survival and protection of Lebanon's Druze community, and his weekend statements are possibly another step toward solidifying an alliance with National Assembly Speaker Nabih Berri to that end. Unlike his father before him, Jumblatt cannot depend on his Sunni compatriots or their Saudi patrons, and he is likely looking to safeguard Druze interests through reconciliation with Syria and Lebanon's Shia population to avoid a repeat of May 2008's Druze-Shia violence in the Chouf region.

¶9. (C) It is not yet clear how Jumblatt's words will play out in government formation. Even should he bolt, we hear that as many as 7 of his 12 Democratic Gathering Bloc MPs are likely to remain with March 14. Hariri must retain a majority of them to form his cabinet. While Jumblatt's defection will further delay the already protracted government formation process, all our March 14 interlocutors insisted the coalition was allowing space for him to return to the fold, as many expect him to do.

SISON